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## *Dave Durenberger* It Wasn't a Vote Against the Contras

There was greater consensus in Congress about the need for action on Nicaragua than last week's vote on the president's request would indicate. The consensus was obscured, however, because we were dealing with several tactical issues unfortunately merged into one vote.

The essence of these tactical issues concerned the particular tools used to dissuade the Sandinistas from their policies, but not the need for dissuasion itself. The revelations of 1983 and 1984 meant that the previous formula for providing covert lethal assistance to the so-called *contras* was simply at a dead end. That's why Congress placed prohibitions on 1985 funding.

Nonetheless, President Reagan endorsed the release of \$14 million on April 2, hoping to use the money to leverage a dialogue between the Sandinistas and the opposition. His "big stick" was the potential provision by the CIA of lethal assistance. He knew that the weight of advice from Congress was against that course, but he chose to take the gamble in order to break a deadlock.

In subsequent negotiations between the administration and a number of senators, it became clear, as was later demonstrated in both the House and Senate debates, that there existed a strong consensus on the nature of the Sandinista government and the potential threat it poses to U.S. interests. However, there was also a widespread feeling that we have not yet exhausted all possible sanctions short of paramilitary assistance. In addition, a large number of senators and representatives, like the president, were interested in using at least some portion of the \$14 million for leverage with the Sandinistas. Because leverage can take many forms, both positive and negative, it was impossible for more than 500 tacticians to agree on the most appropriate use of the money.

In short, a comparatively minor tactical issue obscured an underlying policy consensus and left Congress paralyzed. There are two lessons to be learned.

First, the American public recognizes that rhetoric and reality are out of sync. In the absence of a comprehensive, coherent and long-term Central America policy—a failing noted by senators on both sides of the aisle—annoying inconsistencies have come to dominate debate. If a consensus is to develop behind American action, the questions and contradictions must be an-

swered. Why support the opposition? Why the armed opposition? Why use the CIA rather than some other agency or instrument? Why recognize and trade with a regime described as hostile? Why refrain from collective diplomacy? And, most important, what is our overall policy objective?

Second, it is clear that Congress should help the administration develop a policy by demonstrating where common views are held and by indicating what policy tools will be considered supportable, and what will not. The continued discussions with the administration were a major step in this direction, and most participants were surprised at the depth of the fundamental agreement. That consensus must now be refined and activated.

In the meantime, what do we do next? We cannot remain trapped in a policy vacuum waiting for the next fiscal year. There are a number of useful steps to be taken in the short term.

The president should immediately take his case to the members of the Organization of American States. We cannot continue to tolerate a situation in which Latin governments privately encourage us and publicly keep their distance. And we cannot afford to revive the specter of unilateral action in a region that has known too much of that already.

At the same time, to tangibly demonstrate that the United States is serious about its commitments to the region, the president should send to Congress a positive agenda for the future. Reintroduction of the Jackson Plan for regional economic development would make the president's diplomatic tasks much easier by manifesting a real commitment. It will not be easy to swallow an \$8 billion assistance package over a five-year period at a time when the United States itself faces massive deficits. But it will prove far cheaper than doing nothing.

Finally, Congress should quickly commit itself to passage of the Jackson Plan. Last year, we parceled out a bit of aid in a continuing resolution, but we did not ratify a genuine long-term policy. If we do so, we will provide needed support—moral as well as material—to the fragile democracies that face intimidation (or worse) by the Sandinistas. We will use the economic leverage that has not yet been attempted. We will provide to the Sandinistas a distinct incentive to act in a manner consistent with our interests and the interests of the region. We will demonstrate the consensus that does exist in the United States, and we will show that Congress can play a constructive role in foreign policy.

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